

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Alice Pung, *Her Father's Daughter* (Black Inc., 2011)

Building on her highly successful first memoir, *Unpolished Gem*, which dealt with growing up in a Chinese–Cambodian family in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, Alice Pung's second memoir swings between alternative perspectives of father and daughter, for the most part. It begins with the father's point of view and his mantra for living, 'To live a happy life ... you need a healthy short-term memory, a slate that can be wiped clean every morning' (5). Towards the end of the book the daughter invents the term 'dismemory' (191) to describe the process of deliberately forgetting to remember:

Dismemory sounded like a foreign country filled with heaps of miscellaneous cast-offs. And people in clusters, picking up the pieces, also called Dismemories. People wearing their Dismemories like armour ... Her Dismemories were small, but her father's were enormous. (191)

Learning to forget is one of the ways to establish a life after trauma, but this process comes with penalties. One such consequence is the creation of a vast inchoate sense of anxiety, and such anxieties, which exceed any clear cause or solution, proliferate amongst immigrants, becoming more concentrated with age. We watch our parents surrender to the grip of these swirling fears, which can range from the panic induced by getting on the wrong tram to ensuring there are no sharp knives in the house:

Her father's defence mechanism, she realized, was a piece of precision engineering, but it was also an archaic machine, one that was not well oiled, one that was no longer used for the purpose for which it had been built. (106)

Pung's new memoir brilliantly captures those immigrant paternal anxieties that circumscribe the lives of their children and gradually reveals where these fears are rooted. She takes seriously the injunctions of her father's friends to be a repository, an archive, for their stories concerning the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's Killing Fields that constitute an unavoidable reference point in their generation's lives; the tales are waiting to be revealed and interpreted when the descendants are ready to hear them (111). Those descendants implicitly include the wider Australian community whose appetite for the many histories that make up the nation have not traditionally been open to the diverse traumas that impede the hegemony of triumphalist versions of that story, as Aboriginal Australians, amongst others, can testify.

Remembering to forget is also one of the cornerstones of nationalism, as Ernest Renan's classic essay from 1882, 'What is a nation?', reminds us. The phrase also hints at the effort involved in that process – the active blocking of events and memories. In recreating the stories of atrocities Pung is economical with the details – the signs of imminent death involve having the buttons removed from one's clothing (147); a child's murder is marked by faint marks of blood and

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hair on a tree (140). Her father had tried to soothe his children with visions of a broad historical backdrop of ancestors in China, a venerable tradition elsewhere, wanting to conjure a larger theatre for his daughter than the everyday life in the Western suburbs she detailed in her first memoir. But Pung prevails with the 'petit récits' that attract her as being inherently more trustworthy than grand narratives. And it is not as though these details don't imply broader philosophical questions. For example, a recurrent theme is the question of what 'innocence' means and the extent to which it is complicitous with evil. The Khmer Rouge army appears to be composed of adolescent children whose lack of moral literacy means that it seems easier for them to commit random atrocities: they are without empathy which is somehow worse than being motivated by hatred or other strong feelings. The absence of feelings is something that also haunts the book. In her attempts to recreate her father's inner life Pung notes that one of his greatest triumphs was the ability to be able to love after surviving the Killing Fields.

But moral literacy, empathic awareness, are also sometimes lacking in their new home. When the father translates for his compatriots in the migrant hostel he has difficulty understanding what their hosts mean by repeated queries concerning how well the immigrants are 'adjusting'. When they finally understand, some begin to cry (75). It remains for the next generation to go beyond these tears and to explain their source.

Learning to forget also has other connotations, in that the daughter establishes learning itself and an academic life as a bulwark against the memories that emanate from her parents and their circle of relatives and friends. In her first volume of memoirs Pung revealed the many ways in which the children of immigrants spend their lives apologising for or trying to shield themselves from the numerous episodes in which their parents embarrass them through being out of step with most aspects of daily life. At the same time there is a protective armour provided by the solidarity of those family circles – ultimately there is an awareness that survival is dependent on loyalty to family even when their behaviour looks like psychosis to the outside world. The comforting feel of a younger sister in one's bed or the flow of narratives from a grandmother are antidotes to registering the censorious glances of neighbours or fielding the daily interference by parents in their children's lives. When the father builds up his electrical appliance store he generously involves all of his extended family. At the same time, those who are outsiders are sometimes treated harshly. A lonely young immigrant laborer is violently ejected when he awkwardly gropes the daughter. She had agonised about whether or not to reveal this to her father – rightly so as it turns out since his rage is completely out of proportion to the incident. But her betrayal is caught up with her own guilt at becoming a sexual being. Later in the process of growing up, the daughter's attempts to include the parents in her new life at the university are met with reserve on their part. They too have internalised their own lack of fit in this society and take care not to intrude into the new lives their children are constructing.

There is also the suggestion that this complicated upbringing generates a different kind of anxiety in the children. In Pung's case it comprises a fear of committing to the creation of another family constellation – generating one's own dyad in order to learn to forget, to create new memories for another generation.

Although she knows that ‘desire is the accelerator of life’ (23) she cannot surrender to it – yet. Home as both shelter and prison retains its familiar and often paralysing ambiguity.

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